

Pastoral Care of Migrants, Refugees and Travelers

a. We are a diverse people that include immigrant communities, ethnic groups and people on the move who left our homelands, taking with us our stories and songs, faith traditions and culture in search for something better. We are (a) African, (b) Caribbean, (c) Brazilian, (d) new European immigrants, (e) Mayan communities; (f) Migrant farm workers, (g) Seafarers/merchant mariners and all who make their living by sea and the waterways (h) Airport & airline workers and travelers, (i) Circus and traveling show workers.

b. We come from different regions of the world: sub-Saharan Africa; West Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa and middle Africa, Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, North America, the Caribbean, Central and Latin America among others.

As African Catholics we bring with us our rich faith life that sustain us on the journey from Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Ivory, Nigeria, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda among others. As Eritrean Catholics, many of us observe the Ge'ez rite.

A vast majority of us from the Caribbean Islands are Catholic. Many of us Cubans have settled in the state of Florida. We are also from the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad, Tobago, Barbados, etc.

We are Mayans from Guatemala, seafarers mostly from Asia, Europe, Latin America and US merchant mariners. We are airport workers and airline travelers from all over served by the Catholic airport chaplains in major US airports.

As migrant farm workers we come mainly from Mexico and Central America and there are 1.2 million of us who are undocumented and do backbreaking jobs toiling on the fields for long hours in farms all over the USA. We are communities of traveling show people in carnival, circus bringing joy and laughter in small towns and big cities. We are also race car, race horse workers, bull riders and truckers.

c. Our journey has been blessed by different cultures with all the advantages and intricacies attached to our background, a condition that can nevertheless offer us the opportunity to experience the wealth of an encounter between different cultural traditions. We are grateful to those who welcome us when we were new to this land, those who walked with us in faith and those who challenge us to be better.

The ministries coordinated by the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church/Pastoral Care of Migrants, Refugees and Travelers, ministries in our dioceses and parishes and the services provided by non-governmental institutions and humanitarian organizations have also blessed our journey. They have dedicated many of their resources to help us as we integrate organically into American life.

We gather at parish communities that are sensitive to our particular spiritual traditions and help us with our social needs. A good number of our ethnic communities are well organized and served through diocesan and parish structures in collaboration with national groups but other groups need structural support.

For those of us who are people on the move, the nature of our work makes it difficult for us to participate in regular parish life. We are grateful to priests, deacons, religious, and lay pastoral leaders who minister to us in maritime ports, on board merchant ships and cruise ships, in airports, in rural farm areas, in the circus tents and in our traveling cars. The ministry of these chaplains and their pastoral team reflects the Church's care and concern by offering us spiritual and practical assistance. These dedicated pastoral leaders take time out from their regular parish assignments and other ministries to provide us the sacraments and sacramentals and in so doing bring us closer to Jesus.

D. We have faced these obstacles in our path...

The pastoral outreach to our communities have been impacted by the lack of resources and the downsizing of national and diocese structures.

Some of us are in need of priests from our own cultural background or priests acquainted with our language and culture. We rely on occasional visits by priests and bishops from our home country to Mass and provide other sacraments that are very important to us and give us strength in our daily lives, but also provide leadership formation so that we can be part of the local Church and share our gifts and become pastoral leaders.

Some of our second and third generation immigrants are becoming more and more secularized. Our young generation who are born in this great country are often torn between the cultural traditions and values of parents and the prevailing values of American society.

For those of us who are undocumented, we have many of fears nowadays because of immigration enforcement and worksite raids. We are concerned about the Arizona immigration law. The law would lead to racial profiling, community distrust and a pervasive fear among immigrants. There is a need to educate our members about their rights. As migrant farm workers often times we face harassment by local enforcement officers in the streets and at work.

As seafarers we are separated from our families for long periods of time due to the nature of our work, we also experience sub-standard working and living conditions, work discrimination, substitution of contracts, piracy attacks and criminalization of seafarers and ship abandonment by owners which results in many of us being stranded in the USA.

As we travel to big cities and small towns, circus, carnival, race car, race horse and our traveling show sisters and brothers find it difficult to access regular parish services because of work obligations on weekends. As a result, fullness of Christian life is often constrained by circumstance. We are also concerned of the lack of religious education for children of show folks that travel with their parents.

e. Today we want to seize these opportunities...

... to reach out as a faith community to be active collaborators in the local church. But we need the structure, support and guidance of Church leaders to help us, especially our US bishops. We bring with us our religious and cultural identities; with our numbers we impact the local receiving Church, making vibrant the liturgical celebrations through worship and popular devotions.

We have observed from our family a growing number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life and lay leadership, strong family values, pro-life culture, lively liturgy, rich faith traditions and popular devotions. They "shape the face of the entire church today". From among our people shines core values – young hardworking "work force," human warmth, the gift of improvisation.

As people on the move, we bring a celebration of cultural, religious and ethnic/racial diversity of people in the maritime ports and airports. The chaplains who serve us bring a sense of ecumenical thrust by sharing sacred space for worship and respecting other religious traditions, have sensitivity to the traditions of other faiths and believe in building relationships with ministers of other faiths.

We want to let others know that in our diversity, we desire and seek to be part of the receiving country and the Church. Our work ethics and family values and traditions will enrich the American society and we contribute to the economic life of this great country.

f. Our vision for the future

We know that the Church has become as much an immigrant Church today as it was a hundred years ago. Our vision for the future is that as Catholics we will be more integrated to our local churches and communities, sharing our gifts and traditions, as well as learning from and accepting others so that in our diversity, we can truly affirm our Catholicity. We hope to learn more and that others will learn from us too. We would like to see immigrants, refugees, and travelers in the United States take leadership roles in the local church and community and that the receiving church become more aware of the pastoral challenges new comers face. As integrated immigrants, we want to contribute and be part of the US Catholic church that will reach out to the newly arrived.

We want to see the continuity of the ministries coordinated by the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church to the migrants, refugees, and travelers. As pastoral leaders, we draw our strength from God, from one another, from each one's professionalism and expertise, from each one's willingness to be open and to improve, from each one's capacity to be fully human, trusting and serene, grateful and encouraging, from each one's personal commitment to Christ who has commissioned us at this point in our lives with this sacred task. Furthermore, we strive to respond to the challenges of this ministry in fidelity to the teachings of Christ who said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35) and "whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me" (Mt 25:40).